

INTERVIEW

10. *Noho Rewa*

The Wrongful Occupation of Hawai'i

Abstract: The colonisation of the Hawai'ian people is a story shared with Māori and other Polynesian peoples. It is a story of shame, desecration, loss of land and loss of life. The commonality of the historical Pacific experience, however, can too easily mask the variety of outcomes of the decolonisation process, and for Māori and Pakeha New Zealanders, the present-day lived experience of the Hawai'ian people can come as a shock to those who have never ventured beyond the hotels of Waikiki. In this interview with filmmaker and Auckland University of Technology lecturer Christina Milligan, indigenous Hawai'ian filmmaker and activist Anne Keala Kelly discusses her 2010 documentary *Noho Rewa: The Wrongful Occupation of Hawai'i*. For Kelly, the making of the film was not only a lonely and tough five years, it was also an emotional struggle to document the pain suffered on a daily basis by those of her community who evidence the ongoing struggle of a people who remain tenants in their own land.

CHRISTINA MILLIGAN: You've been described as an activist and a journalist by some people and also as a spiritual ruckus maker. How do you see yourself?

Anne Keala Kelly: I am a filmmaker and I am a journalist and if I'm going to be reporting or filming on Hawai'ian issues in a non fiction way, I have to bring the two together.

CM: When you are thinking about your subjects, what's your driving inspiration?

AKK: Survival. Hoping that I can find a way to tell these stories or to show the conditions of Native Hawai'ians who are struggling to survive in their homeland. That's something that most of the world is really unaware of because of the very American portrayal of Hawai'i that simply is not our reality. So that's always behind what I'm doing—figuring out if I can use whatever skills I have to help Hawai'ians survive.

CM: To take you back a little bit: you got a Master of Fine Arts and Directing at UCLA. What was your thinking in going and taking that particular degree?

AKK: I thought I was going to work for Disney. I thought I was going to be doing just fiction. That's really my first love. I have grown to love documentary but my goal had been to do fiction work so getting the MFA in part was just to hone that, the skills for doing that kind of filmmaking.

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CM: And where did that start to change?

AKK: It changed with me right at the end. I had actually made a thesis film which was a romantic comedy and that's my favorite genre. You know you just change in your life. I thought I'd be able to make Hawai'ian romantic comedies or Hawai'ian comedies (but) my focus shifted and I felt that it was irrelevant to try to do the kind of films that I really want to do. It felt self-indulgent and I want to be relevant. If the work I'm doing isn't relevant to the people I'm making the films about, then I am not sure why I would be doing it.

CM: I'm interested to know what it was like as an indigenous woman studying film direction in California.

AKK: I think to this day I might actually be the only Native Hawai'ian who's been through that programme. It was a really strange place to be. Mostly it's a white community and the people of colour who were in the programme were African American, some Latinos, some Asian. I was the only Native, in terms of identifying as an indigenous person. But I'm bi-racial. I'm Irish and Hawai'ian and I think I code as Haole (non-indigenous Hawai'ian) in that environment, so it was a really awkward place to be. It was like being in a culture shock.

CM: So was it harder, being an indigenous person, or being a woman?

AKK: Both. I know this has happened to a lot of women who have been through film schools. I wasn't the only person who encountered quite a lot of resistance to just being a woman filmmaker. And I graduated in 1998, so it's still a struggle I think for a lot of females who go to graduate programmes.

CM: Moving on to talk about your documentary now - am I correct that this is the first documentary you've made?

AKK: I've done shorts. I've done a lot of guerilla kind of journalism and guerilla documentary work in Hawai'i. Always it was for political activism. This is the first feature-length [work]. And I waited. It took a while after I finished film school, because you know when you come out of film school, you think, I'm going to go make a movie now. I mean everybody thinks that, and it just didn't go that way for me. I found that, if I really was going to do Hawai'ian filmmaking I was going to have to wait and it took a few years before I came to understand what would be the best subject to focus on.

CM: On the film you were the director and the producer as well as being responsible for some cinematography yourself. I wonder if at any stage you found it too big a load to carry by yourself, producing and directing particularly.

AKK: It was excruciating and I wouldn't recommend it except it is something that if you have to do it, then you have to do it. So I had to shoot it, I had to edit it, I had to direct it, I did everything for it, and that was the only way to make that particular film when I look back on it. I don't figure I could have done it another way. I couldn't have done it with a large crew, with a large camera and a crew, because it just was such an intimate place to be.

CM: Can we talk about the camera and the size of the crew? Can you just talk us through the actual filming process?

AKK: I shot it on a PD170 which nobody shoots on anymore, because right after I started shooting, a couple of years later, everything was HD. But I stayed with that format and it was small enough to fit in a back pack. I had a very small tripod, and it was all shot very guerilla-style. That was the only way to do it.

CM: And the rest of the crew consisted of?

AKK: Nobody. There was no rest of a crew. I was lucky actually I had a good friend, Ben Manuel, and he would come and carry my tripod. And that was my crew. You know the thing about making a film, an independent documentary about something as complex as the Hawai'ian sovereignty movement, is that you have to keep showing up over and over again. So there wouldn't have been another way for me to make an intimate, raw portrayal of what really is taking place there because you can't do that with a crew. You can't get ten people to come over and over again. I just had to go when there was resistance, when there was protest. I had to get in the car and go, and that's not something you get other people to do for free.

CM: So how long was the process in terms of shooting?

AKK: I shot that film off and on for over five years, and I was editing almost from the second year. I shot hundreds of hours, though I don't want to give the impression that I was just shooting wild. These were the same issues I was documenting over and over again, a lot of the same people. But the thing about documentary film is, you still have to direct it and people don't realise that. If their performance wasn't good when they were saying something, that didn't work for me when I went to edit, so I'd have to go back the next time. I knew that there was going to be a meeting for instance, and I would know who to film. By the third or fourth time, you know who might say something rich and then I could position myself so that I could shoot it like it was a three camera shoot basically. You still need the shots to cut, you still need the performances. You don't just need them to be saying something compelling, and that's the thing directing a documentary. You have to get the performances and it's much more challenging I think than in fiction.

CM: Did you have a clear sense of the shape of the film (from the start)?

AKK: It's almost an experimental documentary the way it turned out. I had two demilitarisation activists, and the goal was to document their work. I ended up having to go out on my own after the first two years because I had begun the project with two people who weren't going to be able to take a narrative beyond a certain point. So I struck out on my own after that and developed a film without protagonists, but compelling story material.

CM: The protagonist after all is the actual story itself, isn't it?

AKK: Well that's what we end up with but I think it's a really tough sell in any film situation. You know people have to be really interested in the subject or at least they have to be drawn into the compelling nature of the scenes in the film.

CM: So if I understand correctly, the drive in terms of making a decision about what to shoot was the political content? I'm thinking in terms of how you made a decision or balance between emotional content and informational content?

AKK: Well luckily it's all such emotional ... hot issues, right? Militarism, environmental destruction. I mean it's heartbreaking as a Hawai'ian person, to have to film desecration for instance. Culturally, spiritually, that's a very difficult place to be and it would often depress me. I found I went through several depressions when I was making this film because it was so painful. Typically people are very emotional when they're talking about these things, so I was able to find the emotion with the subject. I didn't have to draw it out of anybody except in the interviews.

CM: Where you able to get all the footage you wanted in the end? How would you know when you had enough?

AKK: I knew because I was doing so much editing. The struggle was to make sure I had scenes, right? Pacing is everything, and even though it's not scripted, it still has to feel and move like a scripted film. So I would work on scenes, I'd be editing and editing and editing and I would know when the scene was done. The subject is never done, and I had to, over the course of several years, come to accept that. This film isn't going to save or stop anything because these issues are ongoing, and for as long as this is going on, this film will have some kind of use. But as a filmmaker I think I kept looking for an ending that isn't. That was a really bitter pill to swallow, because I thought I was going to accomplish something politically beyond just the body of the film.

CM: Can you talk us through the editing process? Was it the story that drove you forward always, that gave you your (narrative) spine?

AKK: I was able to just stay with the material. I think that was the big thing, just staying with the material, day in and day out, knowing I was going to be sitting at that computer. You know I learned a lot in film school and I learned a lot doing things in the community but really, editing this film, I learned so much because I had to suffer all the mistakes of my own producing. You know, somebody would say something brilliant and then I wouldn't have a cut away. I wouldn't have what I need to make the scene work. When you're making a documentary, it comes together in the post- production. It comes together in the editing. I found it to be a very spiritual experience and I don't mean that's a comfortable experience. The material would dictate what I could and could not do with it. And so, after several years, I just had to accept that this is very raw, it's very troubling, I'm never going to make it look beautiful, and it wasn't for lack of trying. You know Hawai'i is a very beautiful place. My film doesn't have any of that in it, because real protests (don't) take place in beautiful places. And so, just by staying with the material, I think that's the toughest part for a filmmaker is to just know. You have to trust your instinct. You have to trust that you are doing the right thing. If you're not, stop doing it. I think that in the genre of documentary film, often times we see documentaries that work against the genre. You know, we force these voice-overs, we kind of force shape and we force structure that takes away from the actual raw material. And with this film I was stuck with it being as raw as it is, and I just learned to love that, and I learned to love that process.

CM: And one of the difficulties in working the way you're working is finding a mode of distribution that can get beyond a very small audience. Once you were coming towards the end of the film making process, you wanted to get it out to be seen.

AKK: There was a lot of political blowback, even in my own community, just to this little movie. It's still incredibly relevant, strangely enough it gets more relevant, seems like every year. People around the world are becoming aware of certain things, Monsanto, militarism, you know certain kinds of environmental destruction. So the film has a lot to say about those issues, but when it came to distributing it, I really couldn't do it properly. That's why I don't recommend people go around and make a movie like this, because it's a tough sell. Nobody wants to see the bad news about Hawai'i. You know it's the one place in the world nobody wants to have a bad feeling. It's like the Disneyland of vacations, right? So nobody wants to feel bad about the way they fantasize Polynesia or Hawai'i. They certainly don't want to look at it as what it is. So it's been a self-distribution process, but I haven't really even promoted it because the politics attached to it made it so uncomfortable for me. It's been a strange experience, you know this is my second time to this country (New Zealand) to show this film. It's of interest in certain places and it's of interest to certain people. It's not a comfortable experience for people.

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CM: I think that's very true. Even though I'm moderately familiar with the history of Hawai'ian colonisation, I found watching the film a very uncomfortable and challenging experience, and I just wanted to cry a couple of times.

AKK: And it was a challenging and uncomfortable experience to make it, you see and that's something I think people don't realise. There's no party going on in the edit room. You know there were times where I would shoot for instance Annie Powell, one of the homeless women in the film. She actually died a couple of years ago. And she died out there, you know homeless out there. And I'll never forget coming home one afternoon from filming her and I'm not a wealthy person at all, I was like borrowing a car, you know, to drive all the way out to the coast, and I wept all the way home. Because I thought I don't even have a right to film somebody like that and I felt compelled to film her story, and let people hear what she has to say about her experience of being Hawai'ian. But there's such a fine line between exploitation, right? Between doing something for somebody and doing something for oneself, and as a filmmaker, come on, we're some of the most selfish people in the world when it comes to our films. We know we need to do certain things to make our films live, and we want to do that. So it was often times very painful, because I want to be of service and she wanted to be filmed, but I also understand the medium.

CM: So were there times when you chose not to film even though you were desperate to film a particular event?

AKK: There were times where I couldn't film, culturally. There were many scenes that didn't make it into the (finished film). One was a protest on Hawai'i in an area where one of the last remaining burial grounds on that side of the island was being built over. I went and filmed protests that were going on and it was such an important exchange taking place, an argument between two Hawai'ians. One of them had stopped me, and I knew in that moment I should just keep rolling, but I also knew that I can't. You know I'm Hawai'ian and I have to respect what the people who live here are doing.

CM: It is a very difficult balance, that choice, isn't it?

AKK: That would have been the scene of all scenes because it was the kind of exchange that you don't usually get filmed. There's a scene in the film where the woman from the military base comes out and shouts at the protesters and starts swearing at them and saying what she really thinks of Hawai'ians. We know these things take place but they don't usually happen in front of a camera.

CM: I was going to ask you what was the hardest part but the answer is the whole thing was the hardest part, isn't it? Did you ever want to give up?

AKK: Just about every day. I was always looking for the way out. You know, I should say this about being Hawai'ian. We are genealogical people so if I'm driven to do something about Hawai'ian anything, I'm standing in my genealogy. I can't just quit myself or quit who my ancestors are. So as a filmmaker it was like being trapped in a hall of horrors sometimes, but as a Hawai'ian filmmaker I just knew I had to stick with it and circumstances were going to tell me when it was time. So that was a really bitter experience because I think of myself as a very empowered person and I did not get to run this show.

CM: What do you think the major obstacles are for telling political stories around the Pacific?

AKK: Besides money?

CM: Besides money.

AKK: Having the material resources to tell our stories the way that we need to tell our stories. Now I can say to you this is the upside of having gone through this process that lasted years. I can say whatever I want and own it, okay? I have the same kind of confidence that the most famous filmmakers in the world would have because it's not about arrogance, it's about having to walk it. I barely had enough resources to pull that off but the fact that I somehow managed to do that means that I own that narrative in many, many ways, that will benefit me for the rest of my life whether I make more films or not. To pull something off that really is truly going to represent the experience of people in the Pacific. These are huge challenges. What we really need is community support, we really need people to care. I mean the one thing you learn when you go to film school is that nobody makes a film alone so believe me, for me to say I had to shoot it, I had to do the sound, I had to do all those things, that's a tough gig because I think of filmmaking as a group effort, and I couldn't really do that with this project. I think that I wouldn't want to try to do something like that again because the beauty of making a film, in a way, is the community that you're in when you're doing it. I had to make the political activists my community when I was doing it, you know, but as a filmmaker, boy did I miss being around filmmakers

CM: I just want to ask you one last question, what's your next film going to be about?

AKK: I'm hoping to make a film about Albert Wendt. His work, his art. Actually I made a short guerilla documentary about Al's paintings when he was in Hawai'i, and I want to make a feature length version of what I did with that short film because of who he is, because of how influential he has been throughout the Pacific. So many people have something to say about him. And in documentary when you get people that light up when they talk about somebody and what they telling you—it might even be really

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political or really cultural or really painful, but they light up—he's one of those guys that people light up, every Native and non-Native person I've ever talked to about Albert, just light up and that's the kind of movie I want to make. It'll be very serious but it's also so rewarding when you get to hear people tell you something they love about somebody.

This is one of a series of in-depth interviews on the documentary filmmaking process being conducted as part of a flow of research by the members of Te Ara Motuhenga, a research cluster established by the Screen and Television Production lecturers at Auckland University of Technology.

This interview took place in April 2014.

christina.milligan@aut.ac.nz



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